

## Chapter 5

### Let's Take A Trip North

Sometimes you will find a place that seems to be a break-over point from one world to another. Going South or North from Anchorage is one of those places — this is not the only one in Alaska as you will be able to tell from Parts II and III as you read them, but the difference here is very notable. It seems that every experience in Alaska might have happened in different parts of the world, rather than in one state.

Floyd Akin and his wife invited Marty Davoren and me to their home one Saturday for dinner. Mr. Akin picked us up early in the day to show us Alaska for a few miles to the north of Anchorage. His home was in a rural area 20 - 30 miles north of Anchorage in the Eagle River area, past Fort Richardson, on toward the headwaters of the Cook Inlet.

We left Anchorage on Fifth Avenue which becomes the Glenn Highway (Highway 1), as it passes Fort Richardson. This is the road out of Anchorage which intersects with Highway 2 out of Fairbanks, at Tok Junction and becomes the Alcan Highway across Alaska and Canada, ending at Dawson Creek, British Columbia. I was privileged to drive this highway to the lower 48 passing through Edmonton, Alberta Canada, and ending my journey in Huntsville, Alabama USA, over 4,000 miles — a trip I would recommend everyone to make at least one time during their life. I would love to be able to do it again...

Before I ramble off into another country, let's move back to Anchorage. A little over two

miles down Fifth Avenue from its beginning at its west end on Cook Inlet, we came to Merrill Field, an airport used almost exclusively by the famous Alaska "Bush Pilots." I would guess Merrill Field to be approximately two miles long, and perhaps nearly the same width in places. As far as you could see were airplanes — hundreds of them parked wing to wing, end to end. We were told at that time that Alaska had more planes per capita than any other state, and was home to over 10% of all the seaplanes of the world.

This was a very unusual sight, and on most any clear day, you could spot a dozen or more student pilots in the air around Merrill Field training for their private pilot's licenses. All would later become "Bush pilots" to keep their legend going.

When you looked across the field of airplanes, you could see dents — yes dents — in some of their wings or fuselage, and more than once, I saw planes with a branch of a tree tied in place for a strut they had lost, yet, these "Bush Pilots" are perhaps the best pilots in the world. I flew with a few of them on later trips and can vouch for the fact that you may need a good strong stomach sometimes — but, they always got me where I was going.

I mentioned the First Baptist Church early in this writing, and wish to relate a story about their pastor at that time, Dr. Felton Griffin. He was called to be pastor of that church while he lived in Ft. Worth, Texas and they only had 22 members. He liked it and stayed in Alaska. At the time I was there, he had been there over 20 years. (When I attended it during the period I was in Alaska, I believe they were running over 300 in Sunday School and Church.) Dr. Griffin wore cowboy boots, a string tie, and western cut suits — probably his tie to Texas he didn't want to give up — and would sit in the choir loft and play his violin while the music program was in progress. One more note about this church and I'll move on with my story: Their Organist was totally blind — but boy, could he play. It was a real treat to attend this church while in Anchorage.

Dr. Griffin had his own small plane and liked to fly to the interior lakes to fish, when occasion presented itself. On one occasion he told us he decided to go fishing on the spur of the moment, and forgot to tell where he was going. This can be a fatal mistake. You guessed it, he had trouble of some sort with his plane and couldn't return to Anchorage. It was three

or four days before he was found and his plane repaired, so he could return to Anchorage. All planes, as well as cars in Alaska are packed with survival equipment; food, water, blankets, etc. He said he was now very particular to tell where he was going, and to go where he said he would be.

I'm sure there are thousands of stories, or even books that may never be written, out of Merrill Field alone. But let me leave you with this; don't ever underestimate the "Bush Pilots" — You may need one sometime, and they might be all that could help you.

Moving on out the Glenn Highway we passed Fort Richardson, a very pretty setting, facing the foothills of Chugach Mountains which keep getting higher and higher until they become an ice field. If you keep going East out the front Gate of Fort Richardson, you will climb several thousand feet up to a ski area supplied as part of the Recreational Program for the military. On a later trip, I drove up to this area — some view looking back toward Anchorage.

In the fall and winter there are lots of moose in this area, as well as some black bears and other wildlife. As we indicated when we wrote about the Alaska Railway, moose are very unpredictable, sometimes rather meek, and other times very aggressive. A large bull moose may weigh up to 1800 pounds or even more, and when antagonized becomes a foe worthy of respect. The moose is not a pretty animal — long nose, antlers big enough to give him a headache just to carry them around — perhaps this is why they have such a nasty attitude toward people, cars, trains, or whatever.

Mr. Akin told us a couple of experiences he had had with moose — one the moose won, and the other, the moose walked off without a fight.

We were now as well as I remember, some ten miles out of Anchorage — not yet to Eagle River. The area was more hilly, not real steep, but with enough of a rise in the winter to make you take notice when driving on ice. Mr. Akin drove this route to work daily, and on a particular day noticed a large bull moose just off the side of the road. Having lived in Alaska

for quite a few years, and knowing the temperament of moose, he said he *knew* better, but anyway he stopped on the side of the road on this hill to view this fine specimen of a bull moose from not too far away. He looked at the moose — antlers 6 feet across, and with unfriendly eyes — the moose looked at him, and started coming his way. Mr. Akin said he knew right away it was time to move on — but he had forgotten about the ice his pickup was parked on. He tried to go, but the harder he tried, the more his wheels would spin. He just sat there with his wheels spinning — watching the moose get closer and closer. Well, the tires never did catch, and the moose made scrap metal out of his pickup — while he was sitting in it. He was not injured, and as soon as the moose had had his fun, he turned and slowly walked away, apparently completely satisfied with his sculpture masterpiece, somewhat resembling a pickup.

The other encounter he had with a moose was while he was building his home, north of Eagle River. In Alaska freezing ground during the winter makes certain construction practices mandatory. In the Anchorage area, most houses are built with a basement. This protects the plumbing under the house from freezing, as the heat source is generally in the basement also. Mr. Akin was in the process of framing in forms for pouring the concrete walls of his basement when another big bull moose walked up to a ramp he had built for entry to the basement area for deliveries of lumber and concrete. Here he was, in a ten foot deep hole in the ground with one entrance/exit, and a large moose standing in the middle of it. If he tried to get out, he must all but brush against the sides of the moose, and if he stayed, the moose could easily walk down the ramp and do whatever damage he desired to Mr. Akin. He told us he all but stopped breathing, standing as still as he could, but expecting any moment that the moose would attack. He swears it was hours that they looked at each other in not too friendly a fashion, but it was probably just a few minutes until the moose turned and walked away. We must assume the moose was just checking over the construction — was pleased — and returned to the wilds. Mr. Akin said from that time on he placed a ladder up the opposite side of the excavation, and his pickup across the ramp, so either way he could make a quick exit.

From this point just south of Eagle River looking north, was beauty personified. The birch were turning — white trunks and bright yellow leaves. They were intermingled with evergreens — these stately and beautiful — not like the scrub timber immediately southeast of Anchorage. Above the timber line the mountains were red with what I was told were wild blueberry vines. And a little farther on down the road if you looked across the flats next to Cook Inlet and the Matanuska River you would see hundreds of acres of fireweed blooming in their brilliant red. The roads were lined with gooseberries and cranberries so close you could almost reach out the car's windows and pick a handful. Some plants I never did identify, had very large leaves resembling an elephant's ear. The foliage was very thick along the sides of the road and was almost impenetrable.

I believe I have moved down the road too far again, too quickly — leaving some very interesting topics behind. So back to Eagle River.

Eagle River is a community and also a roaring river heading somewhere out in the mountains. This is a very beautiful area with several homesteads located up the Eagle River valley to the east, which are accessible by road. On a later trip I drove out one of these roads — what a view! On another occasion I attended dog sled races in this area, but I'll cover those in Part III. On this trip we passed on through enjoying the scenery of the area as we crossed the river on a high bridge over a deep canyon.

The next two points of interest, I may have reversed on my mental map, but if you will permit me to have them out of order I think we can enjoy them just as well.

To the east side of the road (Glenn Highway) I noticed a small masonry constructed building high up the side of a mountain. As you already know, I'm not very good at guessing heights or distances in Alaska, but if you hold me to a guess, I would have to broadly estimate it to be between 1500 and 3000 feet up the side of a very steep mountain — my best guess would be the 3000 feet. There was no access road to it, and how it was constructed in that

place I can't explain. The only access to it I could see was up a set of steps — as in stairs — all the way from the base of the mountain up. Anyone who could climb those steps can have all the bragging rights he wants — I know I couldn't do it — even then.

At the base of the mountain was a hydroelectric power plant — this I do know about, having worked in an area office over two plants back in Oklahoma. This was the electric power source for Anchorage and the surrounding area. No lake could be seen. Mr. Akin explained that there was a large, deep, glacier fed lake back in the mountains. The building on the side of the mountain was the entrance into an inspection tunnel. There was a several hundred foot head on the turbines, as I'm sure you are aware. This configuration could be a nightmare for a large earthquake, say 8+ on the Richter Scale.

Engineers and divers were called in as quickly as possible after the earthquake to check everything out. Of course generating power was out of the question, as the possibility of rocks the size of automobiles could crash into the turbines completely tearing them out of the building and releasing the entire reservoir to spill out on the area.

Divers had to swim out all the conduits, inspect the turbines from their upstream sides and the gates for safety and repairs if needed. Even the bottom contour of the lake itself, particularly near the intake to the turbines had to be checked for rock slides.

Fortunately for everyone, there was no significant damage, and power was able to be restored in a reasonable time. In fact, damage was much reduced to the north of Anchorage than it was in Anchorage itself and farther south. Sometimes even in adversity some things work out pretty good.

The next topic of discussion of this trip was a small "native" cemetery. As we were traveling down the road, Mr. Akin pulled off to show us this very unusual sight. Each grave had a small "house" built on top of it, about the size of the grave, with a gabled roof — all of them together looking like a miniature city. They stood about 2 - 2 1/2 feet high, were painted white, with red roofs (roofing as you would put on your house), but with no windows or entrances. Mr. Akin told us the "natives" who were buried here, had all their worldly

possessions buried in the "houses". Relatives kept everything painted and repaired. A very small chapel was located at the edge of the cemetery which was also well kept at that time. I don't know what they worshipped, but this sight was something I will always remember. I hope the "modern" society never desecrates it. Whether you believe their religion or not, the historical value of this cemetery should always be kept and maintained.

As we traveled north toward Palmer there were many small streams running down the sides of the mountains. It was now as I remember around the first part of October — the snows had not reached the valleys and lower ground, but were noted on the mountains in an ever creeping line moving down their sides. We all knew we would wake up some morning soon and everything would be covered in snow where we were.

The salmon were running. If you've never been near a stream to *see* and *smell* this phenomenon, you have missed quite an experience. The dead fish caused by the mass suicides which take place after they deposit their eggs, can be smelled for miles. Two - three foot long salmon were so thick in the very shallow streams, they gave a solid appearance you might think you could walk on. Always struggling to swim farther upstream back to the place they were born, even though their bodies were mostly out of the water where they were. Some instinct guides them back to the exact spot where they were born, where they then lay their eggs for the next generation, and so on and on it goes.

Then there was the other side of the picture, all entwined into one single act it seemed. For several feet off the banks of the streams, there were thousands of dead salmon. Having deposited their eggs, they threw themselves out on the banks to die. This is a mystery to science but a ritual every generation of salmon performs.

The odor generated by all the dead and dying fish is impossible to describe. The sight is very interesting — how nature works. But the odor I would have liked to miss.

In this same area are hundreds of acres of fireweed — beauty beyond most of our imaginations, right along with an act of nature depicting the end of one generation and the start of another. Beauty and death — all as God created it.

We reached the headwater of Cook Inlet where it became a wide river which at that time of the year had only a few small streams in the river bed. We were told that during the spring thaw, it became a wide, roaring river, filled to its banks. We were advised that the bridge we were crossing sustained damage during the earthquake. On a later trip I drove this road again — both the road and the bridge had been replaced.

We made a quick trip into Palmer, near the head of the Matanuska Valley — Alaska's deserving claim to agriculture. The Alaska State Fair is held here each year. Produce from this part of the state is remarkable, forty pound cabbage heads, strawberries the size of your fist (still bearing when the snows cover them up) and many other items of produce you wouldn't believe. We will touch on other agriculture products as we move on through our trip. Palmer is a small town compared to towns in the lower 48, but it is the agriculture capital of Alaska.

From Palmer we headed out Highway 3, a planned road from Anchorage to Fairbanks, by way of the Mt. McKinley National Park. Construction had been completed on each end but the very difficult construction around Mt. McKinley had not been started at the time I was in Alaska. This road parallels the Alaska Railroad from Anchorage to Fairbanks, and will be an important highway when it is completed.

While driving along enjoying the scenery, Mr. Akin stopped the car on the side of the road and asked us to get out. From the car, we couldn't see anything unusual. He walked to where a small path led off into the underbrush and trees. He asked us to follow him, and watch our steps. In a matter of just a few feet we climbed down an embankment to a sight almost impossible to describe. A natural lake some half mile wide by maybe a mile long was before us. Birch and evergreen trees lined its banks and blended into its mirror-still waters to where you couldn't tell where the land ended and the water began. The colors were spectacular — I was spellbound and could have enjoyed the scene for hours.

Mr. Akin then asked if we could see a small single-engine pontoon plane sitting to the far side of the lake. It was very hard to find in all the colors, but then it began taxiing for take-off. It flew out very close to where we stood. This could have ended a perfect day, but there was still more to see this day.

I must make this note before we leave this lake. On a later trip to this area, the new road constructed after the earthquake was built right through the middle of it. Most of its beauty was destroyed as progress took place.

Our next stop was at an agricultural experimental farm up the Matanuska Valley road. We were told they were trying all kinds of agriculture products to see if they would adapt to this region. One of the strange things we were told was that corn would grow the best plants in the world, but the growing season was not long enough or hot enough for it to mature. The ears, if any, were quite small.

In the yard of the farmhouse where we stopped was an apple tree. Bright red apples (I don't know what variety they were) by the hundreds covered the tree. They were small but appeared to be very hardy. Aside from their size, they were quite successful.

Another interesting sight was mowers and hay bailers in a patch of wheat. We looked closely at the wheat and saw that farmers in the lower 48 states would give their eye teeth for heads of grain like this. There was just one problem, the heads wouldn't ripen, therefore it was no good as wheat, but made excellent hay.

One other thing in the Matanuska Valley and we will go on to Mr. Akins' for a tour of his place. The only dairy in Alaska at that time we were told, was located in the Matanuska Valley. Fresh milk is hardly ever available outside the Anchorage area. Milk and milk products were rather expensive in Alaska. Being a big milk drinker myself, this might have caused a problem had they not perfected a process whereby they canned fresh milk. You could tell a slight difference in the taste, but when that is mostly all you had available, you learn to get along with it pretty well.

We had lots to talk about on our trip back to the Eagle River area where Mr. Akin lived.

Mrs. Akin greeted us when we drove up to their home. A very nice lady who really extended their hospitality. She joined us on an excursion of their home and garden. So let me get right on with the garden.

They had planted and maintained a small garden like many of you or your neighbors might have. There was one major difference — the size and quality of the produce. Let me add before I go on, that it was quite evident they had taken care of it — weed free, with rows hoed and plowed. Such attention might help some of the lower 48 gardens — but then who can do their gardening all summer with temperatures in the upper sixties to the lower seventies in the lower 48.

Mr. Akin went to a row and pulled a radish — the kind you buy in supermarkets, small, red, and firm; the size of a large marble. The only difference was, the one he pulled was the size of a turnip. He peeled it there in the garden and handed it to me to eat. You should know that I like radishes, but I had never been known to go into a garden, pull one out of the ground and eat it; but he insisted. Surprise! This radish — the size of a turnip — was firm through and through, had a very good taste, not hot nor pithy — and this was October, just before the snow came.

He then took my movie camera from me and invited me to go to a cabbage plant where the head had not been pulled. He made movies while I measured the size of the head with my hands. My guess would be that it was at least twelve inches across.

He showed us strawberries, carrots, green beans, and most of the garden products you might grow — all prize specimens.

Our meal was delicious, and as we enjoyed our meal and coffee, Mrs. Akin related to us her experience during the earthquake — a few broken dishes, a chair turned over here and there, but never did she dream that just 30 or 40 miles to the south, thousands of people's property was being wiped out with many people injured or dead. What a difference a few miles can make!

We reluctantly returned to Anchorage that night carrying our memories with us. It has been 31 years since this remarkable day, the friendship as well as the scenery has been etched in my memory forever. How nice it would be to repeat this day again, but, I'm sure things have changed in many ways.